

Cultural and Religious Identities of Bawean Societies Overseas

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ABSTRACT

The tradition of the diaspora of the Bawean community is closely related to cultural identity and socio-economic activities in the past. The connection of Bawean Island with maritime and trade movement has created the tradition of diaspora following seafaring routes toward economic centers. Bawean people are very unique that the island administratively is part of Gresik Regency (East Java), the dominant language is Madurese, but its culture is Malay. They are often known as the Boyan people and living in large communities in Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam and Christmas Island, Australia. This study uses a multidisciplinary approach by utilizing historical methods and cultural studies. It aims to analyze the role of Bawean cultural identity and the socio-economic conditions of the Bawean people in shaping their spirit of the diaspora in Southeast Asia and how they are culturally easy to be accepted by other communities overseas. This study found, firstly, the traditions and socio-economic conditions of the Bawean people are very influential elements in encouraging diasporic activities. Second, the religious model of the Bawean community which is full of tolerance as part of the archipelago (Nusantara) tradition affects cultural adaptation overseas enable them to be accepted by others.

Keywords: Bawean, Culture, Religion, Identity, Adaptation and Diaspora

1. INTRODUCTION

Not many people know Bawean. This island in the middle of the Java Sea seems abandoned by the times. From the past until now Bawean has not changed much, in terms of development, Bawean is developing slowly and tends to be stagnant [1]. The general public may only know Bawean as much as they have heard his name, but do not know where it is, what kind of island it is and how the people are. The island is starting to be forgotten as stated by A.B. Lopian that in the *Indonesian National Encyclopedia* (1989) the entry of the name Bawean was no longer found." [2].

According to historical records, it is stated that around the year 1300 there was a Majapahit boat that passed to the west of Majeti Island and was stranded due to the crashing of the sea waves. Majapahit was the Hindu kingdom in East Java ended in 1478. After normal conditions and the morning sun began to rise, a series of mountains that were visible from the distance appeared. At that time the captain shouted "bawean", which means sunshine. Since then, the island of Majeti has been known as the island of Bawean [3]. In *Negarakertagama*, it is stated that Bawean Island is named Buwun. In the notes of *Serat Praniti Wakya Jangka Jaya Baya*, it is explained that the inhabitants of Bawean started in the year 8 Saka, which were previously uninhabited. The Dutch and European colonial governments in the 18th century named the island as Lubeck, Bavian, Bovian, Lobok [4].

Bawean Island is inhabited by people who come from Madura, but when this process started is uncertain. Based on historical records, it is stated that in Bawean Island an Islamic kingdom was established under the leadership of Sayid Maulana Umar Mas'ud in 1601-1630, up to the seventh generation of his successors, namely Raden Panji Prabunegoro or Raden Tumenggung Pandji Tjokrokusumo in 1747-1789. This is in line with the story circulating among the people of Bawean, that Islam was brought by Said Maulana Umar Mas'ud, after defeating first the unbelieving King Babi and witchcraft [2]. Currently Baweanese are dispersed outside the Island of Bawean even overseas such as in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia.

This article aims to analyze the role of Bawean cultural identity and the socio-economic conditions of the Bawean people in shaping the spirit of the diaspora of its people in Southeast Asia. This study also intends to analyze the cultural adaptability of the Bawean community overseas.

2. METHODS

This study uses a multidisciplinary approach, namely history and cultural studies. The historical approach is used to find the correlation between the culture and socio-economic conditions of the Bawean people in the past with the tradition of the diaspora which is still preserved today. In terms of data collection, the authors conducted a process of searching data from manuscript sources and interviews. The research method includes several stages,

namely 1) topic selection, 2) source collection, 3) verification (historical criticism, source validity), 4) interpretation: analysis and synthesis, and 5) writing. This study uses archive sources stored in the Jakarta National Library.

A cultural study approach is needed to analyze the influence of culture in building the tradition of migrating and the extent to which the Bawean community overseas can easily be accepted by other communities. The ability to adapt and local culture brought from the country of origin turns out to be able to integrate with the local culture. The character of the Bawean people who are closely related to the Islamic traditions of the archipelago makes them able to have a positive impact on local communities abroad.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. *Diaspora and Cultural Aspects of Bawean*

Some research on ethnic migrations in Indonesia shows that the tradition of the diaspora is built on a cultural system [5]. Likewise, Bawean people are better known as migrants than other names. The habit of migrating with its success stories has given birth to cultural values that have been passed down from generation to generation. Migrating is a culture and value system referred to by the Bawean people. Some of Bawean's poems contain a philosophy of life as a guideline for the life of the community, such as the saying "*ajhek nyengkap sewe' mon ghitak ngoker lange', ajhek ngoker lange' mon ghitak cokop sangu laher batin,*" which means, do not open the female dress (marriage) before opening the sky (wander), do not wander until you are physically and mentally sufficient. Migrating is an inseparable part of the culture of the Bawean people [6].

The worldview of life of the Bawean people is also poured into the Bawean song lyrics related to the culture of migrating. Migrants are still expected to return even though in fact many of them later settle as foreign citizens overseas. One of the most famous poems is as follows.

Bhebien
Entolah suara ate bule
Sanyaman-nyaman neghera oreng
Tak senyaman e Bhebien
Sittung artena sittung epaengak-engak
Ate-ate bede enageran oreng, sittung artena
Kadeduek jhek lambek-lambek
Sakabbina ento se e kaenga e

(Trans) Bawean
Hear the voice of my heart
As much fun in the land of people
Not as comfortable as in Bawean
Only one thing to remember
Be careful in the land of people, only one
Second, don't be too long
Remember sister's message

For the Bawean people, Bawean Island is an island of birth and death, wandering is only temporary to come back later. Although some live permanently in overseas areas. Furthermore, Samwil explains why Bawean is called the island of life and death because Bawean Island is very suitable as a place for the birth of human children and a place to spend old age. Bawean Island is rich in fish with nutrients that are very good for the growth of the body and brain of toddlers. Bawean is an ideal place in old age because this island has a religious culture such as many Islamic boarding schools, away from the noise of the city, and almost no immoral entertainment places [1].

The Bawean diaspora can be understood from its typology. According to Cohen [7], based on a territorial perspective, the typology of the diaspora is divided into four types, namely 1) labor diaspora, 2) imperialist diaspora, 3) trade diaspora and 4) cultural diaspora. With this typology, the Bawean diaspora is included in the first category, namely the labor diaspora, where the main objective of migrating is to find a better life and fulfil economic needs. This is also supported by archipelago shipping that has been going on for centuries.

The diaspora theory proposed by Cohen is supported by Lopian's explanation regarding the interaction between islands through shipping to allow the integration of the people in the Indonesian archipelago and abroad. For the Indonesian archipelago, nature has provided communication channels in the form of maritime routes. All they need is courage, ability and skill to use this maritime route. Driven by the economic and cultural needs of the Bawean people, the Bawean people travel and travel to various regions.

As an egalitarian maritime society, Bawean residents are open and used to interact with other groups through shipping and trade that have been going on for several centuries. In its historical records, Bawean Island has long been inhabited by population groups from various ethnicities. Among them are Madurese, Javanese, Bugis, Palembang ethnic groups who are called the Kemas group and others. The meeting of these ethnic groups makes Bawean a strategic place for the birth of a new life and the growth of a new culture [8].

The occurrence of a social process due to the meeting of groups of people from different cultures is called assimilation. The assimilation process is a social process that arises from society whenever there is one; 1) groups of people who come from different cultural environments, 2) individuals in society interact intensively with each other for quite a long time, 3) the culture of each group changes into one, or the existing cultural elements change into mixed cultural elements [9]. The intensity of the association of ethnic groups in Bawean is very high because they mingle in various interests such as economic, social and cultural so that in their development they call themselves "Bawean people".

3.2. Seafaring and Maritime Movement

Bawean Island is a relatively small island but has its uniqueness. Bawean researcher Asyhar mentioned that Bawean's uniqueness is that it administratively follows Gresik Regency, which is the dominant language of the Madurese version but with customs such as Malay [10]. This uniqueness is because the Bawean community is an egalitarian maritime society. They are open and used to interact with other groups through shipping and trade that have been going on for several centuries. The strategic position of Bawean which is in the middle of the Java Sea makes it easy for the Bawean people to connect with other regions, in the archipelago to foreign countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam to Australia. Its unique location has formed a society with a distinctive culture, which in the past was more city-oriented, especially Singapore, a place of immigration that was the dream of Bawean youth from the 19th century to the early 1960s. Intensive interaction with the Malay world through shipping routes and the large number of Bawean people who migrated there, made the Bawean people closer to the Malay tradition, compared to the Madurese tradition which was their ancestor.

According to Lopian, Bawean's central position in the past inter-island shipping lanes made it as a stopover for replenishing food and drinking water as well as a shelter against storms and typhoons. Furthermore, A.B. Lopian explained that Bawean Island was once part of the KPM shipping network with a route that once connected it directly with Singapore. However, now it is only navigable by local shipping, which connects to Gresik. Sometimes it is seen that the voyages of the people using traditional boats stop by on this island as if they are reminiscing about the legacy of the extensive voyages between the islands in the past [2].

The seafaring of the Indonesian people occurred in ancient times. The people of the archipelago, now known as Indonesia, have been connected to the regional and global systems for a very long time. They even reached the African continent. Indonesia arrived in Madagascar since 400 AD and continued through the West Coast of Africa and Congo [5].

The seafaring has impact and influence on the social, cultural and economic dynamics of Baweanese. Shipping in Bawean has encouraged Bawean residents to migrate abroad, this process is then referred to as the Bawean diaspora. As stated by Samwil [1] that at the beginning of the 19th century, many Bawean residents had migrated to Java. Residents from West Bawean migrated to Matraman of East Java such as Jombang, Kediri, Tulungagung, Solo, Jogja to Banyumas, while residents from East Bawean migrated to East Java from the offshore of Tuban to Banyuwangi.

The existence of Bawean in the chain of KPM shipping routes makes it easy for Bawean residents to go to various places, especially to find a better living abroad. During this period until the early 20th century, they

targeted the lands of the Riau Archipelago to Malay lands, such as Johor, Batu Pahat, Negeri Sembilan and Kuala Lumpur [1]. There they formed a community called the Boyan. They generally work as contract workers on rubber and oil palm plantations or work in the rice fields of smallholders and only work a little on large plantations.

Starting in 1906, KPM expanded its business by opening new routes from the Dutch archipelago to other countries, including in 1908 KPM opened a route to Australia under the name *Java-Australie Lijn* (JAL). This is what makes the Bawean people divide to Christmas Island to western Perth in Australia [6]. In its historical record, this KPM voyage lasted until the 1950s. Furthermore, shipping in Bawean is limited to local shipping, Bawean - Gresik. The termination of KPM shipping changes the orientation of the destination of Bawean residents. From 1960 to 1980, many Bawean residents were scattered in the Tanjung Priok area of North Jakarta. There most of them work as manual laborer, builders or construction workers and sailors on ships.

So, like the ebb and flow of coastal waters on this island, the existence of Bawean also experiences ups and downs, following the dynamics of shipping that occur in Bawean. If in the past the geographical position of Bawean was very strategic and brought blessings by being one of the links in the Indonesian shipping chain, now the geographical position of Bawean seems to be the main problem. Where even though it is included in Gresik district, but its location is separate from the island of Java, making it seem remote and forgotten. Bawean, which is nicknamed the Pearl of Java, is a pearl that is still tightly stored in its shell and is submerged in the seabed of history.

Seafaring is an integrated system consisting of transportation in waters, ports, safety and security as well as protection of the maritime environment. According to Reid [11], a voyage that is a trip from one island to another is possible because of the monsoon winds which periodically in a certain time unit they move from East to West, from South to North and vice versa. The archipelago, especially in the western part, since the beginning of the first millennium has been shipping traffic from East to West, from China to India. Subsequently, the network expanded to include Japan in the East and Arabia which then went to the Mediterranean Sea.

3.3. Bawean Communities Overseas

It is estimated that the Bawean people began arriving in Singapore in 1849 where there were about 763 people. Even so, the Bawean people have started living in Singapore since 1828, their existence was not categorized in a separate group. It wasn't until 1849 that they began to be called the Boyan people. A large wave of Bawean people living in migration to Singapore occurred in 1901-1911 when the Dutch East Indies colonial government

began to apply high taxes. The famine that hit Bawean Island during the World War forced thousands of Bawean people in small boats to dock in Singapore. Their arrival in Singapore caused panic among immigration officials. With the guarantee from the Singapore Bawean Association to be employed as laborer in Singapore and plantation workers on rubber plantations in Johor, they were then allowed to enter Singapore territory. Besides, the discovery of steamships encouraged the development of shipping in the world so that the Dutch East Indies government began to open a new shipping company *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* (KPM) which passed through the island of Bawea to Singapore. Another shipping company was opened by a Chinese operator, The Singapore Heap Eng Moh Shipping Company which also serves shipping through Bawean Island and ends in Singapore.

Most of them work on plantations and also become manual laborer. Those who have just arrived in Singapore would be accommodated in a place called a *pondok*. This cottage is led by a chairman called the *lurah*, a village head. *Pondok* itself is an important term in the Islamic tradition of Nusantara which indicates a place to study religion. The Bawean people used to send their children to learn Islam at the *pondok*. The close relationship with the Malay people caused the Bawean people to undergo an acculturation process adopting Malay identity. This influence also had an impact on their traditions and affected the lives of the Bawean people in their place of origin. The Bawean people are part of the Malay ethnic group as an ethnic minority in Singapore.

In Malaysia, in the 1990s the number of Bawean people was around 500,000, while the population of Bawean Island itself was not more than 65,000 [12]. The Bawean people overseas are much larger than those who live on Bawean Island. In Malaysia, they are scattered in Johor Bahru, Seremban, Kuala Lumpur, Klang, Rawang and Ipoh [13]. The arrival of the Bawean people in Malaysia occurred during the British occupation and was the last immigrant group to come compared to other communities such as China and India. However, even though they came late, the acceptance of the Bawean people was higher than the ethnic Chinese and Indians. They not only carried out acculturation but also experienced a process of assimilation with ethnic Malays.

In several cases, the Bawean people in Southeast Asia are often included in the category of the Malay tribe. In Malaysia, people of Indonesian descent and migrant workers are often referred to as "migrants of similarity", because they have similarities in terms of religion, language and culture. This is different from migrants from China and India who are often called migrants of difference" because they have different cultural backgrounds [13].

The process of assimilation of the Bawean people with the Malay culture is interesting because they are not originally from the Malay tribe like in the Riau Archipelago or some parts of Sumatra. This assimilation

did not only occur in the host countries but also carried over to the country of origin on Bawean Island. In Malaysia, the Bawean people then easily adjusted and changed their identity as Malays who were the largest tribe in Malaysia. Their presence in Malaysia was then legally recognized as part of the majority ethnicity. This similarity in culture and religion makes it easy for the Bawean people to marry native Malays in Malaysia.

Both in Singapore and Malaysia, the Bawean people are known as religious, honest, humble and hardworking people. This religious tradition continues to develop overseas because the Bawean people themselves have been educated with a strong religious tradition. On Bawean Island, small children are usually sent to *pondok* to study religion separately from their parents. Therefore, the diaspora tradition itself has been embedded since childhood and it is influenced by religious traditions.

The religion of Islam that develops in Bawean is a type of the Syafii sect, which is the largest religious school in Indonesia which is adhered by the largest community organization called Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) [14]. Nahdlatul Ulama has been present in Bawean since 1934 and continues to develop and be practiced by the Bawean people overseas. Even though they live overseas, they still claim to be members of the NU organization [13]. Religious activities in Bawean Island, such as building mosques and cottages, are supported by the Bawean people in Singapore and Malaysia. Several religious teachers who teach in Bawean communities in these two countries are also imported from Bawean. On religious holidays the Bawean people often bring their teachers from Indonesia to preach and teach in their communities.

The perception of the Bawean people who are religious experts put them in a position as religious teachers and strengthened interactions with the Malays and ultimately made it easier for them to be recognized as Malays. Not only does religion function in instilling the tradition of diaspora, but the habit of being a *Pondok* people also continues to carry over until they arrive overseas. As a result, Bawean villages both in Singapore and Malaysia tend to be safe because every village has a religious figure who maintain harmony between residents [13]. It seems that the *pondok* tradition in the island of Bawean is still maintained in host countries. It has undergone some modifications but still functioned as place to develop Islamic way of live based on based on the religious spirit of the archipelago.

4. CONCLUSION

The tradition of migration of the Bawean people has been ingrained since childhood. They are accustomed to being separated from their families because they have the habit of sending their children to study religion in lodges. They do not meet their elders before succeeding in learning. They were not only motivated to study religion but also to carry out the obligation to worship the pilgrimage to Mecca by taking a long and long journey at

that time. Pilgrims travel through sea transportation and usually transit in Singapore. Various oral traditions also reinforce the importance of migrating as part of important life experience for the Bawean people.

The position of Bawean, which is the outermost archipelago in the eastern part of Java Island, makes this area an important stopover and shipping and trade route. Since long before the colonial era, Bawean has been an important part of national and global shipping. The port of Bawean became even more crowded when the opening of the *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* (KPM) shipping run by a Dutch company and the Singapore Heap Eng Moh Shipping Company which was owned by a Chinese businessman. The two ships made Bawean Island as a transit point from Surabaya to Singapore. From here, it can be ascertained that the culture of migrating was getting stronger, coupled with the low economic conditions of Bawean Island compared to other regions in Indonesia.

The high acceptance of Bawean migrants in Southeast Asia is more influenced by cultural and religious factors. The Bawean people have such great similarities with the Malays that they easily experience acculturation and assimilation. The character of the Bawean people who are considered to have religious knowledge makes their social role very strong overseas, especially since the Islamic religious stream brought by the Bawean people are relatively similar to Malays in Singapore and Malaysia. This reality makes the Bawean people more welcomed by the Malays in general.

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